

Military Order



of the

Loyal Legion

of the



United States.



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 25.

"The Capture of Fort Fisher."





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WAR PAPERS.

25

“The Capture of Fort Fisher,”

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Commander

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AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF JANUARY 6, 1897.

The Capture of Fort Fisher.

It is my purpose to relate my own small share in the operations resulting in the capture of Fort Fisher; but first I will preface it with a brief mention of leading events in order to a better understanding of the final result.

The expedition was a subject of frequent discussion at the seat of government during the summer of 1864, and in September the Navy Department received assurances from the Secretary of War that the necessary land force would be supplied. Rear-Admiral D. D. Porter was assigned to the command afloat, and, with his wonted energy, he soon had a powerful fleet gathered at Hampton Roads in readiness for the undertaking which he vainly hoped might be pressed to a conclusion without delay, for he well knew that the boisterous weather of autumn, and the storms of winter, would soon be upon him, when operations on the exposed coast of the Atlantic could only be conducted with the greatest difficulty and danger.

Unexpected and vexatious delays occurred, owing to the military situation, which prevented immediate co-operation. The naval attack finally commenced on the 24th of December and continued through the following day, when 3,000 troops of General Butler's command were landed, and General Weitzel made a reconnoissance of the fort, reporting that it could not be taken by assault; the troops were then ordered to re-embark and all but 700 men were promptly afloat, the latter remaining unmolested on the beach until the 27th, weather-bound. The General and his army sailed away to Fortress Monroe, but the

Admiral was not satisfied with the result, and represented the case so strongly that an immediate resumption of operations was decided upon.

There has been much discussion as to whether the fort could have been captured by assault at the time of the first attack, and perhaps the answer is furnished by the paragraph in General Whiting's report of December 30, 1864, in which he says: "Whatever the power of resistance of the fort, and it is great, no doubt, the delay due to the heavy weather of Wednesday and Thursday after the arrival of the fleet was its salvation. . . . But we cannot always hope for such aid from the weather, or the blunder of the enemy, manifest here for his not landing and occupying the work before the commencement of the bombardment, and I trust the lesson will not be lost."

On December 31, 1864, the Secretary of the Navy wrote to the Admiral that General Grant would send immediately a competent force, properly commanded, to co-operate in the capture of the defenses on Federal Point. And General Terry, with 6,000 men from the Army of the Potomac, reached the rendezvous at Beaufort, N. C., January 8, 1865, where he was detained by heavy weather until the morning of the 12th, when he sailed, under convoy of Porter's fleet, for Fort Fisher.

Arriving at daylight next morning, the *New Ironsides* and the four monitors immediately engaged the fort, while the remainder of the fleet, and transports, anchored off Half Moon Battery, about four miles to the northward, and landed the troops by means of the ship's boats. They were lowered simultaneously, filled with men, and, at the signal, made a dash for the shore, where, in less than a minute, more than 1,000 soldiers were unceremoniously thrown helter and skelter upon the beach by the surf, which was still heavy from the recent gale.

The troops were all ashore soon after noon, when the whole fleet of 48 vessels, including 5 ironclads, went into action and maintained a furious fire until nightfall, when the wooden ships withdrew, leaving the ironclads to keep up a slow fire to prevent repairs or the construction of new works. The bombardment was continued through the 14th and again on the 15th. An assaulting party of 2,000 men, sailors and marines, were landed during the forenoon of the latter date, and, at 3 p. m., advanced against the sea face of the fort, at double quick, in the face of a murderous fire of musketry from the parapets until they passed the northeast bastion and encountered a line of palisades which stopped further progress. The seamen were armed with cutlass and pistol, which were entirely ineffective, while the weak and scattered fire of the 400 marines had no visible effect upon the enemy. From the manner in which the seamen were armed, it is clear to my mind that the Admiral intended the movement as a feint to draw off the major portion of the garrison under the mistaken idea that it was a combined naval and military attack. As such it was an entire success and enabled the army to get possession of seven traverses before they encountered serious opposition. Colonel Lamb, who commanded the fort at the time of its capture, said, in a letter to a naval officer: . . . "The naval column came up the open beach upon our center. As its success would have been disastrous, I concentrated all available guns upon this column, and met its assault with the larger portion of my men, posting them upon the ramparts so as to fire down upon the sailors and marines."

The possession of every traverse from the seventh was hotly contested, but the enemy were slowly driven from one to another until, at 10 p. m., the fort was surrendered to our forces.

Personal Narration.

During the first attack I was in command of the prize steamer *Vixen* en route for New York. This vessel, when captured, was in command of the celebrated blockade-runner, "Captain Roberts," a British naval officer better known subsequently as Hobart Pasha. I rejoined my ship, the *Rhode Island*, at Beaufort, N. C., January 10th, two days before the sailing of the expedition.

Upon our arrival off Half Moon Battery on the morning of January 13th, I left my ship in charge of her launch, 1st and 2d cutters, and whale-boat, to assist in landing troops. There was quite a heavy surf on the beach, sufficient to insure a wetting to passengers and crews of boats attempting to land in the ordinary manner, so I took the precaution to put a kedge anchor and coil of rope in the launch, and, sending the other boats to the transports for soldiers, I borrowed a metallic lifeboat that happened to be lying astern of a transport, and, pulling to a position just outside of the surf, anchored the launch, put the kedge and one end of the coil of rope in the lifeboat, with an officer and a couple of men, and sent them through the surf. It was the work of a moment to plant the anchor well up on the shelving beach, run the rope through the rings at both ends of the boat, bend it to the ring of the kedge, and haul out to the launch, which was already filled with soldiers from the other boats. We had now established a safe and convenient communication with the shore capable of landing passengers dry shod, provided that they stepped out when ordered and ran up the beach in advance of the next incoming roller.

An amusing scene, and incidentally a wet jacket, was sure to follow a few seconds delay when some over-polite soldier turned to thank the lifeboat's crew for a safe and comfortable landing.

Our route soon became popular and was extensively patronized by the boats of other ships. Something over 500 men, with their equipments, were landed that morning by Tanner's Ferry, as it was facetiously called.

As soon as the lifeboat was in operation I hunted up a transport that was said to have on board the reserve supply of small-arm ammunition, and going alongside, I saw a tall, slender officer, glass in hand, pacing up and down the deck, seemingly interested in everything going on ashore and afloat. I didn't notice his rank, but, thinking he might be able to give me the desired information, I hailed and asked him if he had small-arm ammunition on board. "Yes," said he; "why do you ask?" "Well," I replied, "about three-fourths of the men were dumped into the surf and reached the beach as wet as drowned rats; there can't be much dry ammunition among them, you know, and they are mighty apt to strike a hornet's nest up there in the woods, so if you will have the stuff passed out I'll land it without wetting a box." "I am very much obliged to you," he replied; "I saw the wetting and have been very anxious about their ammunition; just go to the open port forward and it will be passed out at once." They were ready for us and the boat was quickly loaded nearly to the water's edge. "Who was that long-geared so-ger on the upper deck?" I asked of a non-commissioned officer standing in the open port. "Oh, that is General Terry," said he—just then I heard a low but merry chuckle, and casting my eye aloft, there he was leaning over the rail, no doubt enjoying it all. I was taken aback for a moment, but, rallying, told him I would have a supply of ammunition ashore in fifteen minutes, so he need have no further anxiety on that score. I then offered to land him dry shod whenever he wished. "Thank you," said he; "I'll go with you now if you will allow me." "What, and straddle a box of cartridges!"

“Certainly.” “Well, come on then; I’ll drop down to the gangway.” Buckling on his sword and picking up a field-glass, he took his seat astride of a box, high above the boat’s gunwale. Reaching the ferry, we both stepped into the lifeboat, and, a moment later, I had the satisfaction of seeing the General walk up the sandy beach quite dry, as I had promised.

His unostentatious landing happily illustrated the prevailing methods in his command—no fuss and feathers, but a direct and practical application to the business in hand.

Observing a transport with her decks still packed with troops, I went within hail and asked if I could be of service. “You can if you will,” was the curt reply. “I’ve been asked the same question at least half a dozen times, and the moment I explained the situation they sheared off. We have on board Abbot’s Heavy Artillery, which we are very anxious to land.” Going on board, the General informed me that his command consisted of a siege train—officers, men, guns, mules, ammunition, forage, provisions, etc., etc., all of which he was most anxious to have landed as quickly as possible, and the guns in position, for they would be needed in the event of a repulse from the fort, or a determined attack upon the rear.

I took in the situation at once and realized the difficulties in the way, but, disliking to be the seventh mariner to shear off in order to avoid an undesirable job, I told him I would tackle it. He had no facilities, the General told me, for landing the guns and other heavy material, as he had depended upon the naval brigade, which, for some reason, was not at hand.

We commenced operations by mooring the transport near the beach and running a hawser from her bow to our kedge, already planted for the use of the ferry. The men, and mules, were landed by the lifeboat which had been so actively employed in disembarking troops in the early part of the day. The mules

were led, one at a time, to an open cargo port and blindfolded ; a rope's end was then bent to the halter and passed to the crew in waiting ; at the word, they hauled on the rope, which, aided by the impelling influence of a vigorous shove in the rear, sent the helpless brute overboard, when the boat started off at full speed, towing him on his side, helpless and perfectly quiet, to the ferry, which conveyed him into the surf, the teamsters standing by to lay hold of him as he rolled up on the beach.

My men were in blissful ignorance of the unique mechanism styled the Army Mule, and their sympathies went out to the first specimen as he splashed into the cold water ; they hauled him alongside with great care and tenderly held his head above water while he disgorged a gallon or so from mouth and nose, but they paid no heed to my warning to pull away quickly, until he had almost succeeded in climbing into the boat. However, they absorbed knowledge of the animal and his methods very rapidly from that moment until, by the united efforts of three powerful men, his two fore feet were lifted by main force and thrown outside of the gunwale. Our own crews had no further trouble, but a boat sent to our assistance later in the day had a serious time with the single specimen they tackled. He started off by getting one fore leg over the gunwale and using the other as a maul to smash in the planking, defending himself so effectively with his powerful teeth that it was impossible to approach him until he was securely muzzled by a few turns of a lashing drawn tightly around his nose. In the meantime the boat had drifted outside of the fleet when relieved of its burden of mule ; and, to make matters worse, the coxswain lost his hold of the halter. True to his reputation, the beast turned in the wrong direction and swam vigorously out to sea, fighting the boat off so savagely that he was soon miles away, and I was finally obliged to send out and lasso him. The boat retired for repairs.

While this work was in progress I was preparing to land the guns. They were 30-pounder Parrott rifles, dismounted, it is true, yet heavy enough to make the landing of them through the surf, with the appliances at hand, an exceedingly critical, if not a hazardous, operation. I had no boat large enough for the purpose, but, fortunately, found an army launch, flat bottomed, broad of beam, and strongly built, which we adapted to our use by constructing a platform of cross timbers, from keelson to gunwale, and placing upon it two transverse riders, each having a score in the centre line, over the keel, for the reception of the gun, which was landed by the ship's tackles, and securely lashed. The hawser was used as a hauling line, to which both ends of the launch were secured just outside of the surf; the end of a shore hawser was then bent to the gun and manned by two or three hundred soldiers, who stood ready at the signal to haul it from the boat and drag it up the beach.

The plan worked admirably when all of its parts operated at precisely the right time, but several things were liable to interfere with its harmonious action, particularly when, at the critical moment, the stern, or outer fastening, was slacked away to bring the launch parallel with the beach, where she could be held only for a moment at best, and every succeeding roller nearly capsized her. The gun-lashings were cast off only when the strain on the hawser was sufficient to insure the piece leaving the boat instantly and on the right side.

A successful operation left the launch half full of water, which we cheerfully bailed out with buckets.

The result of our first day's operations was the landing of the men, mules, a quantity of forage, provisions, ammunition, and two or three guns with their carriages and equipments.

We returned to the *Rhode Island* at night, in obedience to the Captain's order. I was on the detail for the naval assaulting

party and supposed I would remain on shipboard in the meantime, as would doubtless have been the case had it not been for an innocent-looking note General Abbot requested me to hand to Captain Trenchard, which resulted in my returning next morning, with orders to remain as long as I could be of service to the General.

An incident of our night pull from the transport to the *Rhode Island* is worthy of mention as an illustration of the innocent and unsuspecting manner in which some men will run into danger. We were wet, cold, and pretty well fagged out, and had a long pull before us at best, so to shorten the distance we went inside of the ironclads, which were still in action; the shells passed far over our heads, so we had no anxiety on that score, but we had failed to reckon with the wooden sabots, one of which soon came hurtling in our direction, followed a moment later by its mate, hopping, skipping, and splashing about in this direction and that until it nearly caught us. We waited for no more but promptly put the monitors between ourselves and the fort.

I did not view the situation with any degree of pleasure next morning; my dream of glory had departed and I bewailed my fate silently until I reached the transport, then I sought sympathy from a few officers, veterans from the Army of the Potomac, who happened to be present. They listened patiently enough and finally one of them smilingly assured me that he didn't suppose I'd lost any valuables in the sand up there around Fort Fisher, and I ought to consider myself d——d lucky at having escaped the assaulting party.

Our work progressed without interruption until a little after noon on the 15th, when a confederate gunboat opened fire across the wooded peninsula; it was wild at first, improving rapidly, however, until it threatened to interfere with our comfort, but

half a dozen gunboats returned the compliment and soon silenced him.

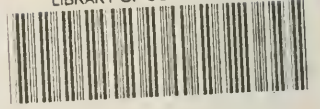
The next interruption occurred about 4 o'clock, an hour after the troops and sailors moved to the assault, when General Hoke's advance struck the entrenchments guarding the rear of our lines; a brisk fire of musketry ensued for a few minutes, doing little damage to either side, but causing myself and crew some anxious moments. We were in the act of discharging a gun from the launch, and as I was about to give the order to Haul away! the troops were sent into the trenches; before leaving they carefully took a turn with the hawser over a fluke of our anchor, which prevented our casting it off from the gun, or hauling out to the transport, so there we were, taking the stray bullets intended for our friends in the trenches. As though the situation was not already sufficiently interesting, they threatened on board the transport to cast off the hawser and get out of range; the bullets were cutting up their deck-house. I do not call to mind the exact language in which I threatened them if they did such a cowardly thing, but it had the desired effect. My crew did not at first recognize the pattering on the water about us as flying bullets, but presently one struck the gun and fell into the water in the bottom of the boat, where the coxswain found it and finally handed it to me, with the remark: "Blowed if it ain't a musket ball." Fortunately none of our party were struck, and within a very few minutes the enemy were in full retreat up the peninsula, followed by a hot fire from the reserve squadron of gunboats.

Word came to us a little after dark that the naval assault had been repulsed and that many wounded seamen and marines were lying on the beach waiting transportation to the hospital-ship. Although greatly exhausted, we went immediately to their assistance and worked until the men were unable to handle their

oars, then went on board of a gunboat that happened to pass near us as she was going out of action, where we were made as comfortable as circumstances permitted. There were no fires in the quarters, so I went into the engine-room, where I found the Chief Engineer at the throttle. He suggested that I turn into his bunk while he dried my clothing, which I proceeded to do after swallowing a pot of hot coffee that had been passed up from the fire-room. I was hardly in bed before a stiff horn of Navy sherry was mysteriously shoved under my nose in the darkness; I do not know to this day whose hand it was, but it warmed me up, and I dropped off to sleep. It seemed hardly a minute, and couldn't have been many, when I suddenly awakened to find my friend, the Chief Engineer, standing over me and shaking me with all his might, crying out at the top of his voice: "Turn out, Tanner! Turn out and cheer! The Fort is captured."



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